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Spy's friend

Shh! Need any papers destroyed? Chester County company can help

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The secret agent faces imminent capture. He must destroy certain documents, but there is no time. So he simply chews up the vital papers and swallows them, thus preserving his nation's secrets.

Well, that ingenious technique may succeed on the screen for Warner Bros., but it's no good in real life for such mammoth bureaucracies as, say, the Central Intelligence Agency or the Royal Canadian Mounted Police or even Rohm & Haas Co.

All three need to get rid of tons of paper, much of it confidential, on a regular basis. They can't swallow all this information. And so they destroy it with equipment made by tiny Somat Corp. in western Chester County.

Somat counts the CIA, the Mounties and Rohm & Haas among its customers for a system that provides, it says, "irreversible disintegration of sensitive documents."

The Navy is also an important customer. The Naval Sea Systems Command in Washington says that 70 of its surface ships, ranging from aircraft carriers to frigates, destroy documents with Somat equipment. It says that 240 ships use Somat gear for food disposal.

Under a current contract, Somat is making combination document-destruction-food-disposal equipment for the Navy. And William R. Crawford Jr., Somat Corp.'s crusty, 83-year-old, polo-playing owner and board chairman, thinks that one day all Navy ships will be outfitted with Somat units so that, if capture seems certain, all confidential papers can be quickly destroyed.

"Remember the Pueblo?" he asked, referring to the Navy intelligence-gathering ship seized by North Korea in 1968. "If they had had our equipment, they wouldn't have given up all their documents."

There are, of course, various ways of destroying documents. You can shred them, pulverize them, incinerate them, pulp them. Somat says pulping is the most efficient.

That's what its units do. All operate on the same principle. Confidential documents, private papers, records of all kind are dumped into a pulping tank where they are mixed with water and chopped into little pieces by whirling cutting blades.

The soggy residue, called slurry, is pumped through a sizing ring whose diameter may be as small as one-

quarter inch. The slurry then flows by pipe to a unit that extracts the excess water and dumps the pulp into a container for removal to a landfill or some other final resting place. Meanwhile, the water is recirculated.

The price for Somat's document-destruction equipment ranges from \$10,000 for small units to \$100,000 and more for the largest ones, which can destroy 2,000 pounds of paper an hour. Installation costs are extra. All Somat pulpers are custom-made at its plant in Pomeroy, two miles west of Coatesville.

"We don't have any off-the-shelf stuff," said Joseph Panas, who has been president of the company since October 1981.

He noted that Somat, which has 60 employees, also makes food-service waste-handling systems and wastewater treatment equipment. In fact, about 40 percent of its sales are in food-disposal systems, he said.

Of the remaining sales, 20 percent are for equipment that makes pulp of municipal sludge. 20 percent to the Navy and 20 percent to other customers of its document-destruction units.

Panas said that "we're under \$10 million in total annual sales."

Somat has just opened a "records-destruction service" at its plant in Pomeroy. For \$90, its pulper will destroy up to 1,000 pounds of confidential papers or other documents.

Its first customer is Sperry Corp.'s farm-equipment division in New Holland, Lancaster County. Sperry is making weekly deliveries of engineering drawings and other documents that it wants to keep from prying eyes, a spokesman said.

For an extra \$45 per trip, Somat will pick up documents that companies in the metropolitan Philadelphia area want destroyed, Panas said.

Somat has been making document-destruction equipment for about 10 years, and its business is now growing at about 20 percent a year, said Panas. But it hasn't been easy, according to Crawford. He purchased

control of the company in 1962 from its late founder, Kurt Wandel, who invented the equipment.

"We've had tough going," said Crawford, "but we really have a fine company now." He said Somat has been making "small amounts of money" for the last 10 years but that Panas was the first president "I've really been satisfied with."

Somat's customers use its equipment for different reasons. "We use it for the destruction of classified waste that is water-soluble," said Charles Crawford, of the CIA's public affairs office. He said the agency has three Somat units with a common extractor station at its headquarters in McLean, Va.

The machines take the CIA's classified papers and "break them down to spitball consistency," said the CIA's Crawford. Then the material "gets put into a truck and is dumped somewhere."

In the basement of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police headquarters in Ottawa, Somat equipment destroys documents every day. A spokesman said that up to 10 tons of paper a month are transformed into pulp.

The First National Bank of Boston uses its Somat gear to get rid of all the office trash in its 37-story building, which a spokesman described as "a paper factory."

By contrast, Rohm & Haas dumps only sensitive company documents into its \$30,000 pulper in the basement of its headquarters at Sixth and Market Streets, Philadelphia.

"We used to pulp all the trash out of waste baskets and it was a two-shift operation," said Tom Mulvey, home office building manager. "Now we collect only confidential materials — personnel matters, promotions, demotions, pay matters. When we get a call from a department head, we collect his material, take it to the Somat room and turn on the machine."

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